Original Article

When Labour Strikes Went Beyond ConventionalGrievances: A Climate of Disquiet inthe Cameroon Development Corporation, 1947-1986

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Abstract - In many parts of the world, labor strikes are organized with the aim of achieving two principal objectives, an increase in wages and improved working conditions in an enterprise. Workers' agitations are often geared towards compelling management to heed to these demands. In the Cameroon Development Corporation (CDC), however, evidence shows that some labor strikes went beyond the conventional motives for workers' agitation. Some strikes actions took the dimension of scores-settling. This paper argues that some worker's unrests were characterized by the call for the sanction, transfer, or dismissal of some supervisory or managerial staff and even fellow colleagues whom they considered friends or toe-rags in the labor force.

Keywords - Labour, Strikes, Conventional Grievances, Disquiet, CameroonDevelopment Corporation.

I. INTRODUCTION

The CDC is the largest agro-industrial consortium in Cameroon that came into being in 1947 to manage a number of plantations that were seized from German planters following the Second World War. The plantations were temporally managed by the Custodian of Enemy Property[1] until 1946. Between December 9 and 12, 1946, a special session of the Nigerian Legislative Council passed two ordinances ascribing to the former German plantations. First, there was the Exenemy Lands (Cameroons) Ordinance No. 38, which provided for the acquisition of the former German plantations from the Custodian of Enemy Property. Second, there was Ordinance No. 39, which provided for the establishment of the CDC. The land surface area covered approximately 98,000 hectares, of which about 36,559 hectares had been cultivated by 1989. [2]The lands were bought at an estimated amount of £850,000 and leased to the CDC for a period of 60 years renewable. On June 30, 1947, the CDC became

operational.[3] With over 20 plantations mostly found in the present South West Region, the CDC became the Second highest employer after the government. By the end of 1947, the labor force stood at about 16,646 workers.[4] By 2016, the Corporation had over 22,000workers involved in the production of rubber, banana, and oil palm products, amongst others.

Before the creation of the CDC, plantation workers made frantic efforts to establish a workers' union but were resisted by the colonial authorities. As a state corporation, dealing with a trade union was going to be a herculean task, given that the government considered trade unionism as a threat to capital accumulation and the achievement of harmony over civil society. The subsequent approval of the CDC Workers' Union (CDCWU) in July 1947 was based on the belief that its leaders would be co-opted by management and government as intermediaries or "brokers" in a strategy to keep the union weak and divided. As a result, the CDCWU would be transformed from a "potential vehicle of labor resistance into an instrument of labor control." Consequently, it was the fervent wish of management to see the existence of "a free but responsible trade union" in Cameroon.[5]

King and Koningsassert that President Ahidjo's scheming to bring trade unionism in the Federal Republic of Cameroon under party control was achieved in February 1972 when the National Union of Cameroon Workers (NUCW) tactfully replaced all the labor organizations and its president became a member of the Central Committee of the Cameroon National Union (CNU) Party. By the end of that year, the NUCW changed its name into the Cameroon Trade Union Congress (CTUC), and with this, the CDCWU disappeared. Membership of CTUC was shared between two newly formed divisional unions of agricultural workers in the South West Province (now Region), where most of the CDC plantations were found. These included the Fako Agricultural Workers Union (FAWU) and the Meme Agricultural Workers' Union (MAWU).



Though there was now a stringent government control of trade union activities, many workers across the board came to believe that the unions would be vulnerable to government manipulations. Given this stalemate, there were times that the workers circumvented the unions to deal directly with the Labour authorities or to engage in strike actions without waiting for the unions to follow the procedure required for the declaration of labor strikes.[6] In such cases, some of the strikes were declared illegal, but this did not stop disgruntled workers from pressing on with their demands for the sanction of some persons in the plantation system.[7]

II. BRIEF LITERATURE APPRAISAL

Although some material exists on labor strikes provoked by low wages and poor working conditions in Cameroon, little or no literature exists on an elaborate discourse on labor protests that were geared towards the sanction (transfer or dismissal) of individuals from plantations systems. Scholars who have written on labor matters and workers' "militantism" have been preoccupied with issues related to sources and labor supply, organization of work, remuneration, management control, and labor resistance in the CDC.

Warmington (1960) discusses the evolution of the plantation sector in Cameroon up to the founding of the CDC. In the 1950s, he carried out a survey among the CDC workers on the supply of labor and argued that the CDC depended on migrant labor, which was largely unstable. He further contends that the mobility of labor due to the fact the works could not make enough gains that would have inspired them to stay on. This, however, gives us only a shadowy picture as to why the manifestation of workers' dissatisfaction in the labor process.

Like Warmington, Ardener (1960) maintains that the CDC relied on migrant labor mostly from outside the plantation areas. Unlike Warmington, however, he argues that the pattern of labor supply had been characterized by numerous complexities, so much so that it was difficult to determine the actual number of people who were ready to offer their labor for a given period. As such, we could argue that the inability to maintain a stable labor force was due to low wages.

Meanwhile, Bederman (1968) has written extensively on the CDC with interest centered on the geographical attractions on the plantation settings. He acknowledges the position of plantation agriculture as the life-wire of the economic development of Cameroon. He discusses the contribution of the CDC workers in the production process but without an adequate evaluation of the input-dividend ratio and how it triggered workers' agitation.

Kurian (1982) has written extensively on the conditions of plantation workers in different parts of Africa and Asia. She gives a vivid description of the

role that women play in the labor system. She intimates that plantation labor systems in Africa and Asia are plagued by sordid conditions. She uses the example of the plantation systems in Sri Lanka to buttress her argument. This gives us a global picture of some of the root causes of workers' agitations in plantation systems. Kurian, however, did not get into the polemics of workers strikes which are at the center of our discourse.

Furthermore, Konings (1993) attempts to reconcile one of the most contentious issues in African labor studies. That is the debate on workers' consciousness and reaction in the plantation labor systems. He presents a panoramic view of the prevailing conditions in the CDC estates and argues that the labor force generally suffered neglect and domination by the management. He concludes that such underpinnings accounted for the conflicts that often occurred between workers and management. The CDC authorities made frantic efforts to develop strategies aimed at keeping the labor force under tight control. While this information would be helpful, this study goes further to investigate conflicts /strike actions in which there was the call for the sanction, transfer, or dismissal of particular persons from an estate.

Labor experts likeGernigon, Odero, and Guido (2000) have written lengthily on international conventions related to work ethics and labor conflict. Based on the principles guiding strike actions, they explore a number of issues related to militant actions by workers. They posit that strike actions are legal if organized after the exhaustion of internationally accepted procedures such as mediation, voluntary arbitration, and collective bargaining. Though helpful to this study, their work, however, does not focus on polemics related to the removal of individuals as a precondition to ending strike actions in plantation systems. This study attempts to fill this gap by sustaining the argument that the need for the removal of "poisonous weeds" from workers' midst was at times motivating for the outbreak of plantation strikes.

III. BROWBEATINGHIERARCHY TO SANCTION OR REMOVE UNWANTED INDIVIDUALS

Between 1947 and 1948, a number of disorders occurred in which workers called for the removal of certain persons from some estates. On December 1, 1948, for example, about 200 workers of the Sonne Rubber Estate in Moline went on strike demanding the transfer of the Head Overseer from the estate. [8] Lewis, the Labour Officer in Buea, arrived Sonne the following day in the company of the Assistant Superintendent and held a meeting with four workers' representatives. The workers complained that they had petitionedFrost, the Estate Manager, calling for the transfer of the Head Overseer whom they accused of

allocating to them more "task work than the Field Assistant ordered...." Unfortunately, the Manager had dismissed five of their colleagues who had prepared the petition on their behalf.[9] Lewis pleaded with the workers to allow Blair, the Field Assistant who had just taken up duty in the estate, time to judge whether the Overseer should be removed or not. Management opted to reinstate the five dismissed men on the condition that they considered the matter closed. Calm returned, and a branch of the CDCWU was installed in the estate. The Labour Officer, in his report to the Commissioner of Labour, however, argued that the confusion was masterminded by a certain Boniface, who had been dismissed earlier but campaigned for support from the workers for his re-engagement. [10]

Another strike action in which there was the call for the removal of a worker from a CDC establishment occurred on April 15,1949at the Tiko Wharf. Over 50 members of the floating staff had addressed a petition to the Chairman of the CDCcomplaining that they were not paid overtime, no increments, and that sick pay was withheld, all caused by the Beach Master, Mr. Thorpe. As such, they called for his removal from the Tiko district.[11] The Labour Officer, however, advised the CDC management not to heed this demand arguing that "[it would] have a very bad effect on the plantations, and we could then expect similar strikes for the removal of various headmen and overseers."[12] The Labour Officer persuaded the Union to call off the strike arguing that"...the possibility of getting Mr. Thorpe moved ...was based purely on a personal dislike."[13]

On April 19, 1949, the Labour authorities summoned a meeting to resolve the Tiko Wharf strike. In attendance were F.E.V. Smith, Chairman of the CDC; Mr. Witcher, the CDC Secretary; Mr. Crawley, Administrative Manager of the CDC, Dr. Endeley, President of the CDCWU and Lewis, the Labour Officer. It was agreed that on or the 15th of each month, the Labour Officer, the President, and Secretary of the CDCWU should meet in the office of the Chairman of the CDC. The Union was charged with the preparation of the agenda of each meeting. Smith then reported to the Commissioner of Labour that all was well and that he anticipated no further trouble in relation to the matter.[14]

In the 1950s, the CDC continued to witness a number of labor strikes against some individuals or groups of persons. These years saw a rapid evolution in the politics of the Southern Cameroons, which impacted attitude of laborers in the plantation milieu. As Foncha's administration took "Cameroonise" the public service, there was a growing animosity against Nigerians who dominated various facets of administration and the economy in the territory. In fact, the Anglo-French partition of

Cameroon in 1916led to the integration of the British Cameroons to Nigeria for administrative purposes. The Cameroon-Nigerian nexus opened the floodgate for the migration of many Nigerians to the territory. With the take-off of the CDC in 1947, many Nigerians came to seek jobs in the Corporation. The Igbo (Ibo) and Efik-Ibiobiowere amongst the ten numerically most important ethnic groups in the CDC by 1958. These two accounted for 4,188 out of the total of 9,136 workers that constituted the ten principal kinfolks in the CDC(see table I).

Table I. Ten Numerically Dominant Groups in the CDC Labour Force by 1958

1958			
Ethnic Group	Place of Origin	No. of Workers	% of Labour
Igbo	Nigeria	2,153	12.1
Efik-Ibibio	Nigeria	2,035	11.5
Ahem	Wum Division	997	5.6
Bafut	Bamenda Division	736	4.1
Bakweri	Victoria Division	592	3.3
Banyang	Mamfe Division	572	3.2
Menemo	Bamenda Division	565	3.2
Funcom	Wum Division	530	3.0
Ngie	Bamenda Division	489	2.8
Bali	Bamenda Division	467	2.6
	Total	9,136	51.5

Source: W.A. Warmington.[15]

Besides the Igbo and the Efik-Ibiobio, seven other Nigerian ethnic groups registered their presence in the CDC plantations. These included the Boki, Edo, Fulani, Hausa, Ijaw, Tiv, and Yoruba. Funtehopines that the plantations provided a "connective resemblance opportunity blend" for both Cameroonians and Nigerian workers, thus creating a platform for interaction and progress though he decries the bad faith that characterized Nigerian domination over the years.[16] In consonant with bone and Nfi, Funteh also agrees that

Nigerians dominated the economic life of the Southern Cameroons, and their growing arrogance led to the "Igbo scare" and acrimony for Nigerians living in the territory.[17] Nfi, however, goes on to show how the "Nigerianisation" was manifested in the CDC plantations and attempts an explanation of their boisterous behavior. He succinctly contends that, unlike their Cameroonian counterparts, Nigerians were involved in other spare-time remunerative activities such as bicycle repairing and shoe-making, which made them richer than the average workers giving them an air of superiority spiced with arrogance and disrespect for others.[18]

The desire by some Cameroonian laborers to see their foreign colleagues ejected from the plantations gotto fever peak following the Eastern Regional Crisis of 1953[19] left some indelible marks in the political history of the Southern Cameroons. There was the birth of two political parties whose politico-economic visions for the territory were influenced by the umbilical cord that linked the territory to Nigeria. The Kamerun National Congress (KNC), led by Dr. E.M.L. Endeley, was founded on the platform of a separate regional status for the Southern Cameroons, and there is no gainsaying that "Igbophobia" was one of the driving forces of this political posture. The Kamerun People's Party(KPP) emerged at the same time, led by N.N. Mbilewanted continuous association with Nigeria. The KNC enjoyed some popularity until 1954, when Dr. Endeley shifted the Party's political goal post from a separate regional status to integration with Nigeria. In 1955, J.N. Foncha broke away from the KNC and formed the Kamerun National Democratic Party (KNDP) to contravene the somewhat KNC political prostitution. This development would have a serious impact on the Cameroonian perception of Nigerians Southern Cameroons' civil service, business sector, and the plantation system.

The KNDP victory in the 1959 parliamentary elections over the KNC-PP alliance paved the way for Foncha's installation of a pro-reunification government as the Southern Cameroons gradually ceased to be a Nigerian backyard. On May 1, 1959, Foncha set up the Southern Cameroons Recruitment Committee with the duty of making sure that no Nigerian was appointed to a post for which qualified Cameroonians were available.[20] This was the beginning of the "Cameroonisation and De-Nigerianisation" policy. Some laborers and those who felt they were deprived of holding certain positions took advantage of this campaign to air out their grievances and to defend their claims.[21]

In some CDC plantations, workers either threatened or went on strike because they wanted the removal of Nigerians due to their officious attitude.[22] In the Tole Tea Estate, for example, Oscar Sama

Ngwamesia, who worked in the estate from 1961-2000, cited the case of Benson Akwan, a Nigerian (Ibio-bio), who served as Headman in the estate in the early 1960s. He was hated for his arrogance and overbearing attitude. The workers threatened on several occasions to go on strike if he was not removed from the estate. Benson was later replaced as Headman by a Cameroonian and was subsequently redundant from the estate by 1975. He then settled in Long Street Small Soppo, a nearby village, where he took up photography as a new source of livelihood.[23]

Furthermore, on July 11-12, 1963, the female workers of the Tole Tea Estate went on strike requesting, amongst others, the transfer of Lawrence Bana, a Senior Overseer, and K. P. MacNicol (a British), the Acting Estate Manager, whom they accused of wickedness and pomposity, therefore a nuisance in the tea plantation.[24] On July 12, 1963, E.N. Balon, an Assistant Superintendent of Police who investigated the strike action, acknowledged that workers wanted the instant removal of K.P. MacNicol and Lawrence Bana.[25]On July 12, 1963, B.S. Agbabiaka, the CDC Personnel Manager, on behalf of hierarchy, promised that both persons would be cautioned and would be replaced if they did not change their attitude. The workers agreed to go back to work, promising to go on another strike if the officiousness continued. This was avoided as MacNicoland Bana was transferred from the estate.[26]

In some states, there were instances of ethnicoriented perceptions, which led to antagonistic attitudes towards certain persons. Some supervisory staff was accused of acts of favoritism towards workers from their own areas of origin. This at times led to vehement protests from those who saw themselves as victims of tribalism, favoritism, and nepotism.[27]At times such purported victims demanded the removal of those responsible for such acts. For example, on August 1, 1963, some CDC workers in Tomball went on strike and petitioned the Vice President of the Federal Republic of Cameroon that a certain Jack, Field Assistant of Balondo origin,"...planned to dismiss all Bamenda, Bayani, Bamileke and Yaounde people and is promoting his countrymen..." [28]Rumours and workers' misconception of management actions at times ignited agitation amongst workers. The said Jack, a Field Assistant, did not have powers to dismiss workers from the Corporation. This prerogative is laid with the General Manager of the Estate Manager after consultation with higher authorities.[29] Just because it was said that Jack "planned to dismiss" some workers was enough to cause the workers to blow the situation out of proportion.

Unlike in Tomball, it was the CDCWU that called for the removal of a management staff inMukonje.Between January 18 and 22, 1964, the

workers of the Mungo Camp of the Mukonje Rubber Estate went on five-day strike action. G.B. Fogam, General Secretary of the CDCWU, argued that the strike action was provoked, amongst others, by the conduct of one Mr. Clark, the Estate Manager. Clark was accused of defying the payment of bonuses to rubber tappers and that he(a European)allegedly insulted them as "black monkeys." He was further of character assassination of workers.[30]Foam complained that Clark was a troublemaker saying he was a "wolf" to the workers and was responsible for the disorders in the estates where he worked earlier. As such, he called for "Mr. Clark's transfer ... for the purpose of good Management and Union relations."[31]On February 3, 1964, P. N. Malafa, Administrative Head of the CDC, reacted to the Union's position, saying that the strike was illegal and that most of the problems raised were in the process of being resolved before the strike broke out."[32]That the transfer of a Manager was a purely a CDC Management affair which was not subject to discussion with the Union. [33] He, however, maintained that "the Union has a right to suggest and if possible, discuss such with the Management if it is to the best interest of the Corporation." [34]

There were instances when workers resisted the reinstatement of colleagues who had been removed from an estate. In the Ndu Tea Estate, for example, the laborers threatened to go on strike on April 6, 1970, if a certain Simon Ndzi, Headman who had been dismissed, was reinstated. The CDC Management, following pressure from the Labour Authorities, contemplated reinstatement him as a Day-watchman but the workers resisted arguing that"he had done many things which made them loose [sic] their wages..."[35] S. K. Chibi and other Police officers were sent to the estate to preempt any violence while attempts were made to resolve the imbroglio. The police advised Murray, the Manager, to suspend the decision, but the latter pointed out that it was based on the recommendation of the Labour authorities. JosuaNgangeAkale, Even Assistant Divisional Officer of Nkambe, found it difficult to convince Murray to reconsider his decision.[36]

Chibi, and Akale, decided to turn toNacassius Vela, the Labour Inspector, E.Y.K. Barton, Union Secretary, and five workers' representatives to discuss the "Ndzi affair." A trade dispute was declared, and it was resolved that Simon Ndzi was suspended from work until the dispute was settled. In distress, Murray retorted that "Ndzi stands suspended on full pay until the dispute is over, I do this for fear of Ndzi's life...." Chibi rhetorically questioned why the Manager showed so much interest in a man who had "almost a thousand men frowning against him." [37]

Apart from formal/collective militant action, workers sometimes employed informal/individual

methods to cause the sanction of others. Konings argues that some workers played tricks on overzealous supervisors in order to get them sanctioned, demoted, or removed.[38] Early in January 1986, some tappers of the Missellele Rubber Estate destroyed over 830 rubber trees by setting fire to them. They wanted Michael Ngu, the Acting Overseer, to take the blame as well as to discredit him. Ngu was suspended for his carelessness and inability to control and secure the sector of the rubber that was under his supervision. On January 24, 1986, Ngu wrote to the Estate Manager in protest that his suspension was unjust and that the fire accident was a ploy by workers who hated him.[39]

IV. CONCLUSION

It is normal to find conflict within a giant agroindustrial complex like the CDC, particularly in management-labor relations. Over the years, the CDC hierarchy had gone through tough times as relations between management and labor registered sour and challenging moments. In expressing their discontent, a new trend was unraveled where workers did not only ask for higher wages but declared the *persona non grata* of some persons and used strike actions as an instrument to settle scores in the plantation system. This study, therefore, paid attention to some strike actions which were directed towards the sanction or removal of certain persons as a condition *sine qua non* for peace and tranquillity in the corporation.

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- [5] Ibid., 107; 111.
- [6] In conformity with the International Labour Organization's regulations, various labor codes in Cameroon have outlined the procedure that governs the declaration of strike actions in a legal or lawful manner. For example, sections 169 of 1967, 165 of 1974, and 157 of the (1992) labor codes indicate that collective bargaining must be engaged in a labor conflict. It is only after the exhaustion or failure of the main instruments of collective bargaining such as conciliation and arbitration that strike action could be declared as a last resort. It is only then that strike action is considered lawful.
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- [18] Nfi, Nigerians on Mission in the British Southern Cameroons, 55.
- [19] In 1953, the rank and file of the National Council for Nigeria and the Cameroons (NCNC), a political party led by Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe, was rocked by a serious political crisis. It stemmed from a disagreement between Dr. Azikiwe, President of the party, and professor Eyo-Ita, Vice President of the NCNC, who challenged the former's leadership. Azikiwe was a member of the National Legislative Council in Lagos, Nigeria, while Eyo-Ita was the party's regional leader in the Eastern House of Assembly and Leader of Government Business in the Eastern Region. Azikiwe wanted radical changes in the constitution of the party and a cabinet reshuffle but was opposed by Eyo-Ita. During the crisis, the Cameroonian representatives realized that their minority position in the Eastern Regional House of Assembly drowned their own pro-Cameroonian demands for separate regional status. As such, the only solution was for some of them to boycott all political interactions with Nigeria.
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- [22] Idem.
- [23] Interview with Oscar Sama Ngwamesia, 73 years, retired Junior Field Assistant, Wotutu Village, (2014). He was recruited as a field laborer in the Tole Tea Estate in 1961. From 1963-165, he worked as Junior Headman. From 1965-1977 he was Assistant Overseer. In (1978), he was appointed as full Overseer. In 1979 he became Junior Field Assistant and worked in this capacity until he retired in (2000). He still had a strong memory of the life and other important happenings at the plantation.
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